

Shelter From The Storm

In the aftermath of Hurricane Rita, VA opened and operated two federal medical shelters for civilian evacuees—a first for the department.

In the wake of Hurricane Rita—the Category 3 storm that ravaged parts of Louisiana and Texas in late September—VA employees established and operated the department's first federal medical shelters to care for civilian evacuees.

The effort highlighted VA's ability to rapidly mobilize resources and may provide a template for future national disasters. "We basically started from scratch and there were a number of lessons learned to make it better next time," said Bruce Triplett, a network support director with the Veterans Health Administration headquarters in Washington, D.C., who helped organize the effort.

Rita made landfall Sept. 24 near Sabine Pass, Texas. The storm's 120 mile-per-hour winds and 10-foot storm surge battered southwestern Louisiana and overwhelmed patched-up levees protecting New Orleans. In Texas, the storm devastated the counties of Beaumont, Port Arthur and Orange, leaving hundreds homeless in a state already inundated with Hurricane Katrina evacuees.

Before the storm hit, Bruce A. Gordon, director of the Central Texas VA Health Care System, identified empty beds at the VA hospital in Waco, located about 200 miles north of Rita's landfall.

It soon became apparent, however, that the relief effort would require more than existing capacity could handle. Gordon's solution was simple: transform empty buildings at the Waco and Marlin VA hospitals into federal medical shelters for hurricane evacuees.



Sharon Jurasek, a nursing assistant with VA's Boston Health Care System, is one of hundreds of VA employees from around the country who volunteered to staff the department's first federal medical shelters.



Drs. Sammy Wong, right, of the Loma Linda, Calif., VA Medical Center, and Loma Mayo, of the White River Junction, Vt., VA Medical Center, share a laugh with a young evacuee.

When the Federal Emergency Management Agency and U.S. Public Health Service came calling, Gordon was ready. "We knew these campuses could be reactivated for surge capacity, so why not be prepared," he said afterward.

There were plenty of challenges in transforming empty buildings into medical shelters, including sweeping up, restoring power, and assembling cots, cribs and other furnishings. VA employees in Central Texas worked side by side with the U.S. Public Health Service to transform the vacant buildings into functioning medical shelters.

At the same time, VA officials in Washington, D.C., were mobilizing employees from around the country who volunteered to deploy to hurricane-affected areas. Robert McDivitt, deputy director of VISN 23, based in Minneapolis, was among the first to deploy, arriving in Waco on Sept. 29.

"I can't say there was a grand plan when we hit the ground, but our people know how to provide health care to a diverse and challenging population and they performed magnificently," said McDivitt, who directed the Waco shelter during a two-week tour of duty.

By the end of his first day, nearly 50 civilian evacuees, mostly elderly nursing home patients and their families, had been admitted to the shelter. Within a few days, the number swelled to more than 170.

Meanwhile, 20 miles south of Waco, VA staff were preparing to receive patients in a second shelter on the grounds of the old Marlin VA hospital, which had been converted to an outpatient clinic several years ago.

Vincent Ng, director of the Providence, R.I., VA Medical Center, helped set up the Marlin shelter and served as its director for two weeks. He said the operation ran smoothly because staff members all follow similar guidelines for patient admissions, end-of-shift reporting, use of computerized medical records and other procedures, even though they came from different VA medical facilities. "Everyone integrated very well, which enabled us to respond quickly to things we didn't anticipate," he said.

With both shelters up and running, the U.S. Public Health Service packed up and left, leaving the operation completely under VA control. "In the beginning, we had no idea VA was going to run the shelters," admitted Gordon, the Central Texas VA director. "But it became clear that we were well suited for this. I think the VA really went beyond what anyone expected and we did it extremely well," he said.

By this time the facilities housed about 300 evacuees. Most had spent time in several different shelters and were eager for some stability. Ernest Sam, 72, an Army veteran from Port Arthur, appreciated the efforts of VA staff to make the shelters as comfortable as possible. "It's really impressive how fast they put this all together," he told the *Waco Tribune-Herald*.

Once the evacuees' medical needs were met, VA staff shifted gears and began focusing on their emotional and social needs. It began with a surprise birthday party for two young boys. Staff took up a collection and bought toys, cakes and balloons. Their initiative brought a sense of normalcy to disrupted lives and sparked an effort to transform the shelters into mini-communities.



Staff helped these boys celebrate their birthdays at the Waco VA federal medical shelter.

Soon the social calendar filled with recreational events like movie nights, dances, anniversary parties and baby showers. The staff scheduled trips to the zoo and library, enrolled children in school, and provided post office addresses for the evacuees. "We had people tell us they'd never been treated so well," said Gordon.

Elizabeth Crossan, public affairs officer for the Central Texas VA, said the shelters evolved beyond anyone's expectations. "It became more than a shelter—it was a place to live and recuperate while caring for their physical and social needs," she explained.

By late October, most of the evacuees were able to return to their communities. The shelters were scaled back and eventually closed. Triplett, the VHA official in Washington, D.C., said those who organized the effort are preparing afteraction reports, which will be reviewed in the coming months. "We need to learn from this," he said, "because I suspect we'll be asked to do it again."

For McDivitt, the deputy network director from Minneapolis, one of the key lessons was the value

of partnering with other federal agencies. "This was a tremendous federal partnership, and VA had the lead, but we couldn't have done it alone," he said.

McDivitt gave much of the credit for the operation's success to the hundreds of VA employees who staffed the shelters. He even sent an e-mail message to VAnguard praising their "heroic efforts" and recommending they be featured in the magazine's Heroes section. "I had to nominate them," he said in a followup call. "They did whatever it took and really made my job easy."

By Matt Bristol, VAnguard Staff

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